UNITED
NATIONS

E

Economic and Social
Council

Distr.
GENERAL

E/CN.4/Sub.2/1993/NGO/17
11 August 1993

ENGLISH
Original: FRENCH

COMMISSION ON HUMAN RIGHTS
Sub-Commission on Prevention of
Discrimination and Protection
of Minorities
Forty-fifth session
Agenda item 13

ELIMINATION OF ALL FORMS OF INTOLERANCE AND OF DISCRIMINATION BASED ON RELIGION AND BELIEF

Joint written statement submitted by Pax Christi International, the International Council of Jewish Women, the International Association for the Defence of Religious Liberty, the International Organization for the Development of Freedom of Education, and the International Fellowship of Reconciliation, non-governmental organizations in consultative status (category II)

The Secretary-General has received the following statement, which is circulated in accordance with Economic and Social Council resolution 1296 (XLIV).

[6 August 1993]

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights incontestably draws its inspiration from the very best that the major spiritualities in the world have had to offer right from their origins. Present-day geopolitical realities, however, all too often point in the hierarchy of values which they profess, to inconsistencies which are at odds with the objectives of the Declaration. This fact deserves to be analysed inasmuch as it frequently gives rise to confrontations of varying degrees of seriousness both within and between communities. Cultural roots are not always free from blame in this respect, underlying as they do group and clan egoisms. Is not the main origin of the conflicts which are today tearing asunder the inhabitants of the earth to be sought first and foremost in the collective memory of peoples marked by their history, their beliefs and socio-religious behaviour which has on occasions strayed from a correct interpretation of their sacred writings? Are not just

solutions to the problems facing our contemporaries - economic imbalances, unemployment and want, social exclusion, the squandering of natural wealth, pollution, insecurity, drug addiction, sectarianism, racism in its various forms, etc. - to be found in a worldwide spiritual reawakening which reconciles the deep spiritual intuition inherent in every human being with common sense, reason and modern scientific knowledge?

Modern-day teaching of religion to children of all faiths sometimes carries with it exogenous elements which over the centuries have become associated with the transmission of the intangible content of the revealed message whose finality can only come into its own in universality. Where such elements are overvalued, they can inhibit the child's emotional and intellectual development, obstructing his relationships with others and constituting potential generators of social injustices, mortal confrontations and, ultimately, wars. The dignity of man is thus in danger of being sacrificed on the altar of a supposedly higher interest of politically dominant ideologies and religious currents. The spirit of sectarianism obscures the spirit of synthesis, which is the foundation stone of conscience and freedom. The time is ripe to narrow differences in ways of thinking and of living which have often been brought into conflict by being artificially isolated as a result of irrational fear induced by attitudes which have become dogmatic and by past wars.

With referrence to the documents and resolutions for consideration under agenda item 13 of the current session, the organizations submitting this statement respectfully request the Sub-Commission:

(a) To invite the rapporteurs concerned to highlight in a carefully considered manner, for each country whose report is examined, the interrelationship between observed violations and local cultural customs in as far as the latter appear to be inconsistent with international norms relating to respect for human rights. This would facilitate a desirable and in some instances necessary cultural evolution, which is in fact already under way in some communities.

(b) To decide to set up a study group comprising human rights experts, specialists in contemporary sciences and well-known persons representing the social and theological thinking of the main religions. The mandate of this group should be to highlight those deviations which are likely in religious teaching to endanger the mental equilibrium of children and to constitute obstacles to their understanding of those who are different from themselves and, when they grow up to their awareness of the universal nature of human rights.

The observations of the rapporteurs and the work of the study group might serve as a basis for a draft declaration by the international community on the socio-religious education of children. Such a declaration would appeal to all faiths to adopt an approach to teaching in harmony with the Vienna Declaration and Programme of Action adopted by the World Conference on Human Rights, which considered "human rights education, training and public information essential for the promotion and achievement of stable and harmonious relations among communities and for fostering mutual understanding, tolerance and peace".